

Opening Statement of Chairman Tanner
Joint Hearing on Eliminating the Social Security Disability Backlog
March 24, 2009

This joint hearing focuses on an issue that has been a top priority of the Social Security Subcommittee for several years: the Social Security Administration's (SSA's) huge backlog of disability claims.

As Members of Congress, we have heard about this crisis repeatedly from our constituents. And in the last few years, the problem has become so acute that it has been widely covered in news stories across the nation. Time after time, we learn of severely ill individuals who face dire, even tragic circumstances while they endure lengthy waits – often extending three years or more – to receive desperately-needed benefits.

In my own state of Tennessee, the Memphis hearing office has a waiting time of more than 16 months – the national average – and waiting times at the Nashville hearing office are even worse, about 18 months.

Sometimes it takes even longer. A constituent of ours in Carroll County was first logged into SSA's system on January 17, 2007, and finally got a hearing less than two weeks ago – 26 months later. A Tipton County resident requested a hearing in November 2006 and is scheduled to finally get a hearing next month – 31 months later. In Gibson County, a constituent requested a hearing in December 2006 and still doesn't know when the hearing will be, because SSA employees in the Nashville hearing office have not had an opportunity to start working on that case at all.

In fact, the backlog problem is so severe that the U.S. Government Accountability Office has included it on its "high risk" list of federal programs. Today's hearing complies with House Resolution 40, which amended the Rules of the House to strengthen accountability and oversight of federal programs.

Congress and SSA began to work together in the last Congress to turn this unacceptable situation around. Since adequate funding is absolutely critical to reducing wait times, in the past two years, Congress has provided SSA with the additional funds needed to begin to address the problem. SSA has made reducing the disability claims backlog a top priority, and implemented a wide-ranging backlog reduction plan that we will hear more about today.

Because of the size of the backlog, however, eliminating it will require a multi-year effort. In addition, SSA has recently been faced with new challenges. Retirement and disability claims have increased steeply due to the economic downturn, on top of the previously-anticipated increase as the baby boomers age. The *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act* provided SSA with some of the funding needed to process these increased claims, but adequate funding in the FY 2010 appropriations process remains critical to allowing SSA to keep up with the increased claims and still make progress in reducing the backlog. We were pleased to see that President Obama recognized the importance of this issue in his budget request for SSA.

SSA's resource shortages have also led to troubling declines in other areas. As the agency has focused on reducing the disability claims backlog, it has been forced to cut back on important program integrity activities that have been proven to save taxpayer money. For example, SSA periodically reviews disability beneficiaries to determine if they still meet the strict medical criteria to qualify for benefits.

While 95 percent are found to be still eligible, about 5 percent are found to have medically improved enough that they no longer qualify.

These reviews are very cost-effective, saving as much as \$10 in benefit costs for every administrative dollar spent on the reviews, but due to resource shortages SSA has fallen far behind in conducting them. We owe it to the taxpayers to ensure that this problem is fixed, and fixed soon. In FY 2009, for the first time in several years, SSA is receiving funding expressly dedicated for program integrity reviews, and we were pleased that President Obama's FY 2010 budget again includes dedicated program integrity funding. We are committed to ensuring that SSA continues to receive the funding needed to enable the agency to provide effective stewardship over its programs.

SSA's resource shortages have also led to declines in service to the public in field offices across the country, as documented in a recent report by the Government Accountability Office, and we will hear more about this today as well.

As we in Congress work to secure adequate funding for SSA, we must also ensure that these funds are spent wisely and in a way that will be most effective at improving service to the public. SSA's productivity has been continually increasing in recent years, and we applaud the agency for its ongoing attempts to become more efficient by improving business processes and using technology more effectively.

At the same time, SSA must also be mindful of striking the proper balance between efficiency and meeting the needs of taxpayers and beneficiaries. It must ensure that efficiency measures do not harm the quality of decision-making, infringe on due process rights, or compromise good service to the public. In addition, while we all would like to see staff time saved through technological innovations, it is important that SSA not assume that fewer staff are needed before those innovations have been tested and proven to be effective. This has been an ongoing concern.

We want to salute the agency's dedicated workers, several of whom are testifying before us today. SSA's employees have a long and distinguished tradition of service. They have worked tirelessly to serve the people who need their help, despite severe staffing shortages. We want to recognize their dedication and service to our country and also thank them for working so closely with the Congressional staff who work on SSA cases. The dedicated staff workers in our Congressional offices in the 8th District work very hard to help constituents understand and navigate the SSA hearing process. I know the other Members on the committee also have dedicated staff working on these issues every day on behalf of their constituents, and we commend them for their contributions.

The issues we are addressing today are not problems that affect Democrats or Republicans. These backlogs impact constituents in every Congressional district with no regard to whether their district is represented by a Member in the majority or in the minority. For that reason, I want to thank Ranking Member Sam Johnson for his leadership on this issue – and Chairman McDermott and Ranking Member Linder for working with us to address these concerns.

Today we will hear from a range of witnesses about the measures SSA is taking to address its service delivery challenges, and what is working and what is not. We look forward to hearing their perspectives.